

Stay and Play in Costa Rica



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PHOTOS | EXCLUSIVE RESORTS & KATHY WENZEL

BELLS AND BYWAYS | Stay and Play in Costa Rica



Michigan is great, but sometimes we enjoy a change. For many of us, that means warmer climates with salty breezes and sandy beaches. The change of environment, and often culture, helps us grow and recharge. Many of us take it a step further and, rather than just vacation, we decide to purchase a second home somewhere outside the state.

Some say that life gives us what we need when we need it, and recently this happened to me. I was invited to experience the Exclusive Resorts property at Peninsula Papagayo, Costa Rica. One of my recent goals is to seize every opportunity that arises, so I accepted.

Exclusive Resorts takes the desire to own a vacation home and turns it into an opportunity to see the world. Based in Denver, this company offers members the chance to stay at a luxury property in more than 75 locations worldwide. And, get this, they aren't hotel rooms, they're homes. Villas and condos with up to four bedrooms and 4,000 square feet -- properties that are designed to make members feel as though they are at their own second

home, without being tied to one location or the responsibility of homeownership. It is a membership-only program that provides top-notch amenities, impeccable spaces, and a dedicated staff committed to making each stay memorable and worry free.

This trip was to be my first time traveling to Central America, and though unsure of what to expect, I was excited. I did a little research on Costa Rica and found that it is a small country of about five million people that has historically been safe for tourists. It has two seasons – the dry season (summer) and the rainy season (winter) – and is known for ecotourism. Approximately 26 percent of the country is dedicated national parks, protected land, and wildlife reserves. It is home to miles of both Pacific and Atlantic Ocean shoreline, lush rainforest, volcanoes, and a variety of exotic plants and animals. And, almost all of Costa Rica's power derives from its own renewable sources– hydro, wind, geothermal, and solar.

Planning my trip was easy - Exclusive Resorts took care of everything, starting with my own vacation ambassador, Mary-Therese. As promised, she worked with me to find out likes, dislikes, the activities I wanted to participate in, whether or not I have any allergies – all to ensure that I had everything I could possibly need while on the trip. She even planned my itinerary (as the ambassadors do for all members).



There are no direct flights to Liberia, Costa Rica, from where I live, so my travel time was a little longer. The skies were clear, and I was able to see awe-worthy sights, including cloud streets and a barrier reef. Yes, there is such a thing as a cloud street.

It was hot and humid when I arrived in Liberia. It was mid-November, just between the rainy and dry seasons. Perfect timing, really, because everything was lush and green, and tourist season hadn't yet kicked into gear. It didn't matter, though, because my driver was prepared with cool towels, cold water, and an air-conditioned van. It took about 45 minutes to get to Peninsula Papagayo from Liberia.

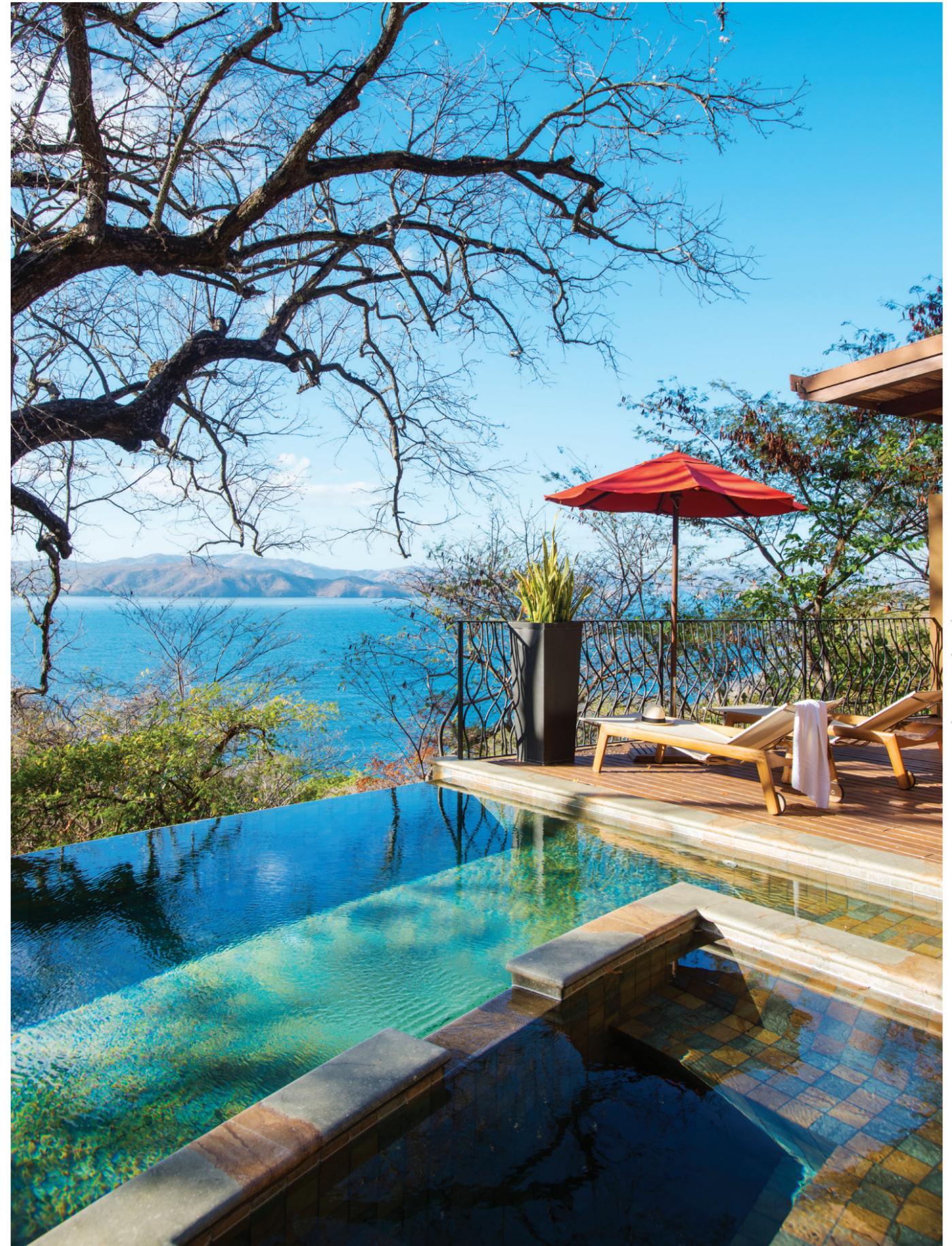
My home for the next few days was Jicaro 19, one of 17 four-bedroom villas at Exclusive's flagship property, designed and constructed to their exact specifications. The Peninsula is also home to the Poro Poro Clubhouse (owned by Exclusive) and to a few other hotel properties, private homes, and amenities, and is accessible once passing through a guard house and past towering royal palms.

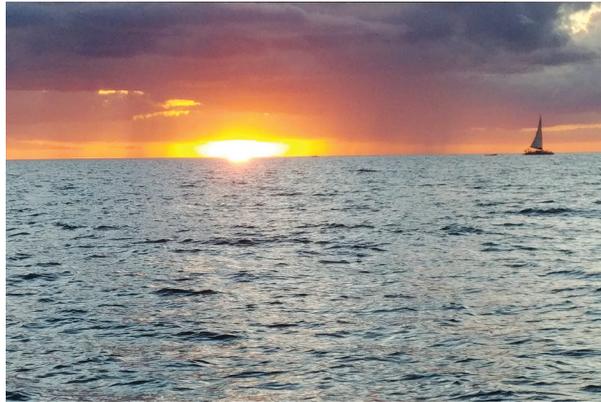
Upon arriving at the villa, my traveling companions and I were greeted by Victor, our personal concierge for the duration of the trip. The villa was stocked with groceries for snacks and lunches, drinks (including wine and a bottle of rum), and even sunscreen and bug spray, both musts.

We toured the house, each room different, all beautiful. My room was the Basket Room because of the bed, which to me looked like a boat. I enjoy nature, and the wall of windows, outdoor shower, and private balcony overlooking the treetops that my room provided was bliss. Victor made sure to tell us to shake out our shoes and clothes before putting them on (spiders, scorpions, and other bugs are common) and to double-lock our doors because the monkeys have learned to unlock and open simple doors.

Dinner the first night was at the Poro Poro Beach Club, and my red snapper was scrumptious, as were the coconut shrimp and beef and goat cheese empanadas.

I arose the next morning to the sound of waves crashing, a beautiful sunrise, and total calm and peacefulness ...





vastly different from my normal pet-owner morning craziness. The housekeeping ladies made a terrific breakfast for us, and then we packed up to go ziplining. We arrived at the Papagayo Floating and Canopy Company and, after some basic instruction, started our adventure: eleven lines over valleys and a river. My mantra these days is to challenge myself – to try new things and grow. Although I have a terrible fear of heights, I decided to try the upsidedown (not quite all the way, but my head was pointed down) and the Superman (hands-free with the hook on my back) positions. It was terrifying and so much fun!

When we returned, Victor had decorated the house with balloons and a cake for my birthday! What a nice surprise. We hit the beach at the Prieta Beach Club, then enjoyed massages on our balconies. I was thrilled to see a family of capuchin

monkeys work through the trees outside my room. Later, we enjoyed a wonderful dinner at the nearby Four Seasons Resort.

Day two was magical, our destination the Kiwanda Maji farm in the rainforest near the Rincon de la Vieja volcano. We learned so much about the country and its people from our guide, Minor, on the drive. We ventured down a single-lane pothole-filled dirt road for many miles to get to the remote farm where we walked the grounds, visited the farm animals, ate fresh cheese, and tasted sweet lemons and rambutan (similar to lychee fruit). We saw gorgeous waterfalls, endless flowers, and stumbled upon a jumping venomous pitviper before dining at a beautiful restaurant on property that overlooked a bright blue pool. It was another world, unlike anything I've seen.

Our final day was a quiet one as we simply enjoyed the Prieta Beach Club and a sunset catamaran cruise. The scenery was stunning, the water calm, and our captain skilled. The day ended with private dinner on the beach below Poro Poro.

This was my first time in Costa Rica, but I hope it won't be my last. The Ticos (Costa Ricans), their zest for life, the tranquility, the landscape, and the exceptional Exclusive Resorts team and property was just remarkable. As they say in Costa Rica, Pura Vida! ☐

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